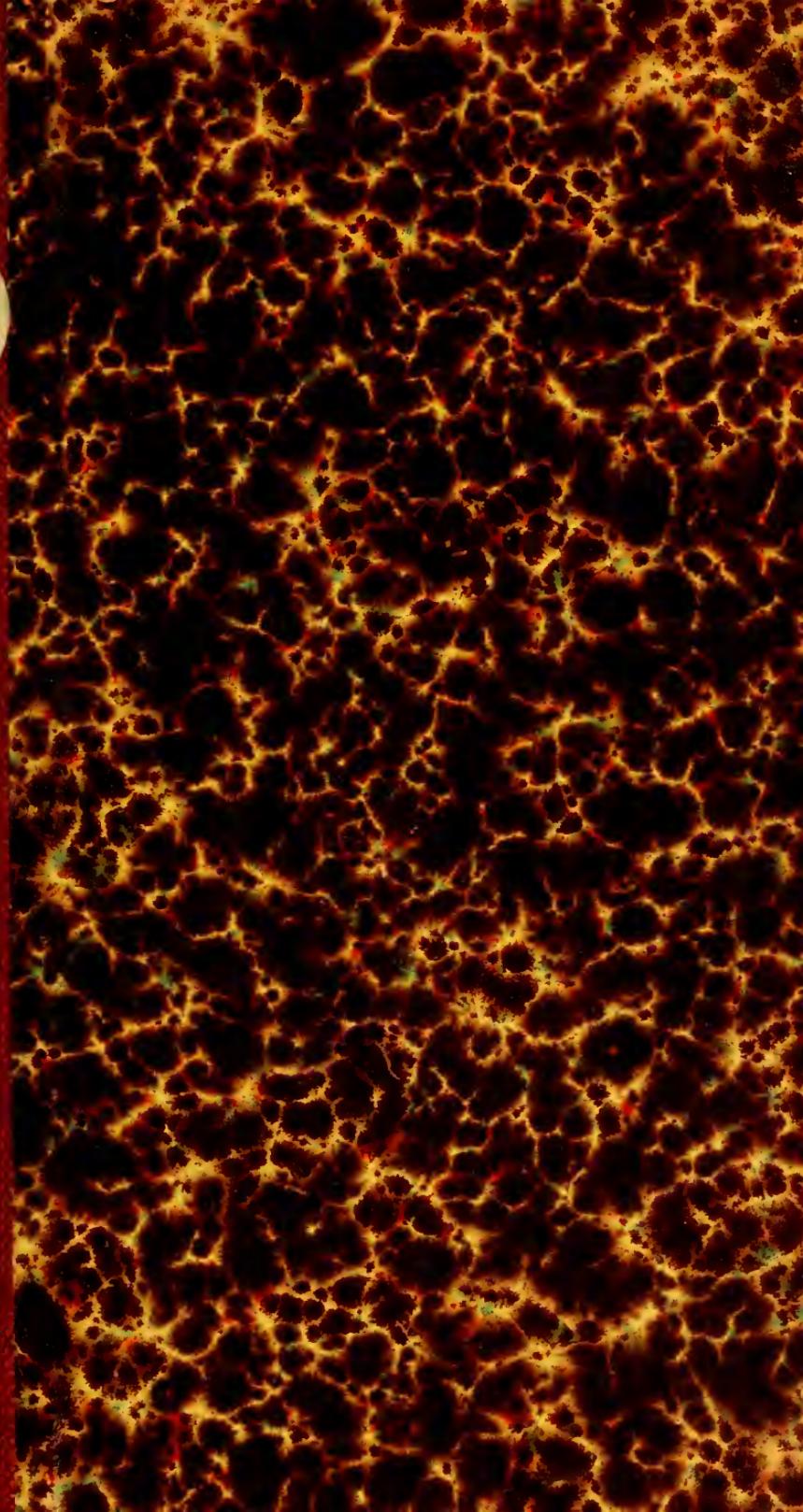


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Address of President Roosevelt
on the occasion of the Celebration
of the Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Abraham
Lincoln • Hodgenville, Ky.
February 12, 1909



Washington
Government Printing Office
1909

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C. G.
S. L. Smith
C. C. 1937

We have met here to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the birth of one of the two greatest Americans; of one of the two or three greatest men of the nineteenth century; of one of the greatest men in the world's history. This rail splitter, this boy who passed his ungainly youth in the dire poverty of the poorest of the frontier folk, whose rise was by

wearied and painful labor, lived to lead his people through the burning flames of a struggle from which the nation emerged, purified as by fire, born anew to a loftier life. After long years of iron effort, and of failure that came more often than victory, he at last rose to the leadership of the Republic, at the moment when that leadership had become the stupendous world-task of the time. He grew to know greatness, but never ease. Success came to him, but never happiness, save that

which springs from doing well a painful and a vital task. Power was his, but not pleasure. The furrows deepened on his brow, but his eyes were undimmed by either hate or fear. His gaunt shoulders were bowed, but his steel thews never faltered as he bore for a burden the destinies of his people. His great and tender heart shrank from giving pain; and the task allotted him was to pour out like water the life-blood of the young men, and to feel in his

every fiber the sorrow of the women. Disaster saddened but never dismayed him. As the red years of war went by they found him ever doing his duty in the present, ever facing the future with fearless front, high of heart, and dauntless of soul. Unbroken by hatred, unshaken by scorn, he worked and suffered for the people. Triumph was his at the last; and barely had he tasted it before murder found him, and the kindly, patient, fearless eyes were closed forever.

As a people we are indeed beyond measure fortunate in the characters of the two greatest of our public men, Washington and Lincoln. Widely though they differed in externals, the Virginia landed gentleman and the Kentucky backwoodsman, they were alike in essentials, they were alike in the great qualities which made each able to render service to his nation and to all mankind such as no other man of his generation could or did render. Each had lofty ideals, but each

in striving to attain these lofty ideals was guided by the soundest common sense. Each possessed inflexible courage in adversity, and a soul wholly unspoiled by prosperity. Each possessed all the gentler virtues commonly exhibited by good men who lack rugged strength of character. Each possessed also all the strong qualities commonly exhibited by those towering masters of mankind who have too often shown themselves devoid of so much as the understanding of the words by which

we signify the qualities of duty, of mercy, of devotion to the right, of lofty disinterestedness in battling for the good of others. There have been other men as great and other men as good; but in all the history of mankind there are no other two great men as good as these, no other two good men as great. Widely though the problems of to-day differ from the problems set for solution to Washington when he founded this nation, to Lincoln when he saved it and freed the slave, yet the

qualities they showed in meeting these problems are exactly the same as those we should show in doing our work to-day.

Lincoln saw into the future with the prophetic imagination usually vouchsafed only to the poet and the seer. He had in him all the lift toward greatness of the visionary, without any of the visionary's fanaticism or egotism, without any of the visionary's narrow jealousy of the practical man and inability to strive in practical fashion for the realization of an

ideal. He had the practical man's hard common sense and willingness to adapt means to ends; but there was in him none of that morbid growth of mind and soul which blinds so many practical men to the higher things of life. No more practical man ever lived than this homely backwoods idealist; but he had nothing in common with those practical men whose consciences are warped until they fail to distinguish between good and evil, fail to understand that strength, ability,

shrewdness, whether in the world of business or of politics, only serve to make their possessor a more noxious, a more evil member of the community, if they are not guided and controlled by a fine and high moral sense.

We of this day must try to solve many social and industrial problems, requiring to an especial degree the combination of indomitable resolution with cool-headed sanity. We can profit by the way in which Lincoln used both these traits as he strove

for reform. We can learn much of value from the very attacks which following that course brought upon his head, attacks alike by the extremists of revolution and by the extremists of reaction. He never wavered in devotion to his principles, in his love for the Union, and in his abhorrence of slavery. Timid and lukewarm people were always denouncing him because he was too extreme; but as a matter of fact he never went to extremes, he worked step by step; and because of this the extrem-

ists hated and denounced him with a fervor which now seems to us fantastic in its deification of the unreal and the impossible. At the very time when one side was holding him up as the apostle of social revolution because he was against slavery, the leading abolitionist denounced him as the "slave hound of Illinois." When he was the second time candidate for President, the majority of his opponents attacked him because of what they termed his extreme radicalism, while a

minority threatened to bolt his nomination because he was not radical enough.

He had continually to check those who wished to go forward too fast, at the very time that he overrode the opposition of those who wished not to go forward at all.

The goal was never dim before his vision; but he picked his way cautiously, without either halt or hurry, as he strode toward it, through such a morass of difficulty that no man of less courage would have attempted it, while it would surely have

overwhelmed any man of judgment less
serene.

Yet perhaps the most wonderful thing
of all, and, from the standpoint of the
America of to-day and of the future, the
most vitally important, was the extraordi-
nary way in which Lincoln could fight
valiantly against what he deemed wrong
and yet preserve undiminished his love
and respect for the brother from whom he
differed. In the hour of a triumph that
would have turned any weaker man's

head, in the heat of a struggle which spurred many a good man to dreadful vindictiveness, he said truthfully that so long as he had been in his office he had never willingly planted a thorn in any man's bosom, and besought his supporters to study the incidents of the trial through which they were passing as philosophy from which to learn wisdom and not as wrongs to be avenged; ending with the solemn exhortation that, as the strife was over, all should reunite in a

common effort to save their common country.

He lived in days that were great and terrible, when brother fought against brother for what each sincerely deemed to be the right. In a contest so grim the strong men who alone can carry it through are rarely able to do justice to the deep convictions of those with whom they grapple in mortal strife. At such times men see through a glass darkly; to only the rarest and loftiest spirits is vouchsafed

that clear vision which gradually comes to all, even to the lesser, as the struggle fades into distance, and wounds are forgotten, and peace creeps back to the hearts that were hurt. But to Lincoln was given this supreme vision. He did not hate the man from whom he differed. Weakness was as foreign as wickedness to his strong, gentle nature; but his courage was of a quality so high that it needed no bolstering of dark passion. He saw clearly that the same high quali-

ties, the same courage, and willingness for self-sacrifice, and devotion to the right as it was given them to see the right, belonged both to the men of the North and to the men of the South. As the years roll by, and as all of us, wherever we dwell, grow to feel an equal pride in the valor and self-devotion, alike of the men who wore the blue and the men who wore the gray, so this whole nation will grow to feel a peculiar sense of pride in the man whose blood was shed for the

union of his people and for the freedom
of a race; the lover of his country and
of all mankind; the mightiest of the
mighty men who mastered the mighty
days, Abraham Lincoln.



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